

Rocksbury, Massachusetts?

By TONY KELSO

Winter is the time when you can see the "bones" of Duxbury's landscape. Now that the leaves are off the trees, the shapes, forms and humps in our landscape appear. Duxbury's bones are generally soft: sandy or clay soil with little remarkable in the way of large rock formations.

Yet here and there, scattered throughout town, are large rocks that poke themselves out of the landscape. Perhaps because in general there is such an absence of rocks in our soil, these large formations stand out, particularly when winter's sharp light lets us see that our local landscape is more varied than we think. Over the centuries these Duxbury rocks have been noticed, named and have stories.

Otter Rock was first named in 1638 and then again in 1724 as a prominent landmark and boundary marker on the South River. Its name comes from otters that were common along the banks of the river in the 17th and 18th centuries. Nowadays, with the return of all kinds of wild creatures to our area, perhaps otters have come back to their namesake rock. You can see it from Chandler Street on the west side just past Ledgewood Drive.



Otter Rock



Parting Rock is another rock named in the 17th century, and lies in North Duxbury. It was first mentioned in 1640 when a group of Duxbury and Marshfield men like Myles Standish, John Alden, Jonathan Brewster and Edward Winslow were laying out the bounds between Marshfield (then called Green's Harbor) and Duxbury. It was mentioned again in 1684 when those bounds were re-established. It was described then as a large rock "flat on top." Tradition says that one of those men, possibly Standish, while laying out the bounds between the towns, leapt up on the rock and proclaimed that from this "parting rock" Duxbury and Greens Harbor would be separate forever, hence the name Parting Rock. The rock lies off of Franklin Street near Parting Rock Road, right on the line between Marshfield and Duxbury.

Cripple Rocks are Duxbury rocks that lie in Kingston Bay just opposite Landing Road. They have always intrigued me, but I know little about them. They appear on several early maps and are first named on a 1774 map. Arnold Freeman, an Island Creek historian, claimed they were named Cripple Rocks because of the injured or crippled seabirds that took shelter there. I like to think they were called Cripple Rocks because they would easily cripple your vessel if you ever came upon them suddenly in a fog.

At the shore end of the Bay Farm conservation land off Bay Road are rocks that overlook the mouth of the Jones River. Arnold Freeman called these "The Devil's Rocks" because Joseph Ripley Chandler called them that in 1830 when he wrote an essay on astrology and called this nook "an abode of evil spirits." Chandler was a Duxbury boy who left town and made good, eventually becoming ambassador to Italy. The only devil there these days seems to be the broken bottles and dog mess left by careless visitors.

The town of Plymouth owns Clark's Island, but Duxbury has always had a spiritual hold on the island in the middle of the bay. In the center of the island is a large rock known as Election or Pulpit Rock. It was on this island on a bitter winter's day in 1620 that the group of explorers off the Mayflower sheltered and rested on a Sunday and then explored Plymouth Bay looking for a place to settle. I have encountered two reasons for the name Election Rock. One is that these men "elected" to hold their Sunday worship there. The other is that picnic parties were held on the rock on certain "election" holidays. The name Pulpit Rock seems to have started around the 1870s when the story was told that the exploring party actually held their worship at the rock. Unfortunately no first hand 1620 account mentions the rock as the site of the worship.

There are two rocks that I don't know the location of in Duxbury. One was called the "Captains Chair" in honor of Captain Myles Standish. It is located somewhere on the east or southeast slope of Captains Hill, near the Standish monument. The other rock was called Indian or Squaw Rock and was (and perhaps still is) located somewhere off of Elm Street near the intersection with Tobey Garden Street. I don't know the story of the name of that rock, but it clearly relates to the native population that lived on the fringes of Duxbury even into the 18th century.

There are probably other prominent rocks scattered throughout Duxbury that certain neighborhoods or families have named and treasured or cursed throughout the years. They appear in unexpected places and provide exclamation points and stories to our relatively flat, soft, and sandy Duxbury soil.